

20 Strategies to Help Your Children Develop Good Character

The following 20 suggestions are excerpted from Dr. Helen LeGette's book, *Parents, Kids and Character*. She brings to the reader knowledge and experiences from her highly successful, 33-year educational career—as a teacher, counselor, and administrator. She knows that children who have limits in the home and whose parents expect good character have a much greater chance at success in school and in a career. Her book offers ideas that can be implemented in any family's home.

Please feel free to share these ideas with parents or community members in your school. Some schools have used these maxims for their newsletters. Other schools have used them on their Web sites and asked parents to share their strategies to develop good character in their children.

1. Model good character in the home.

As William Bennett observes in *The Book of Virtues*, “there is nothing more influential, more determinant in a child's life than the moral power of a quiet example.” It is critically important that those who are attempting to influence children's character in positive ways “walk the talk.”

2. Be clear about your values.

Tell your children where you stand on important issues. Good character is both taught and caught. If we want children to internalize the virtues that we value, we need to teach them what we believe and why. In the daily living of our lives, there are countless opportunities to engage children in moral conversation.

3. Show respect for your spouse, your children, and other family members.

Parents who honor each other, who share family responsibilities, and who resolve their differences in peaceful ways communicate a powerful message about respect. If children experience respect firsthand within the family, they are more likely to be respectful of others. Simply stated, respect begets respect.

4. Model and teach your children good manners.

Insist that all family members use good manners in the home. Good manners are really the Golden Rule in action. Whether the issue is courtesy or other simple social graces, it is in the home that true thoughtfulness for others has its roots.

5. Have family meals together without television as often as possible.

Mealtimes are an excellent time for parents to talk with and listen to their children and to strengthen family ties. Whether the meal is a home-cooked feast or fast food from the drive-through, the most important ingredient is the sharing time—the time set aside to reinforce a sense of belonging to and being cared about by the family.

6. Plan as many family activities as possible.

Involve your children in the planning. Family activities that seem quite ordinary at the moment are often viewed in retrospect as very special and memorable bits of family history. A dad's "date" with a teenage daughter, a family picnic in the park, or a Sunday excursion for ice cream can provide a meaningful time for being together and sharing as a family.

7. Don't provide your children access to alcohol or drugs.

Model appropriate behavior regarding alcohol and drugs. Despite peer pressure, the anxieties of adolescence, a youthful desire for sophistication, and media messages that glamorize the use of drugs and alcohol, the family is the most powerful influence on whether a young person will become a substance abuser. Nowhere is the parents' personal example more critical than in the area of alcohol and drug use.

8. Plan family service projects or civic activities.

At the heart of good character is a sense of caring and concern for others. Numerous opportunities for family service projects exist in every community, and even young children can participate. Simple acts like taking food to a sick neighbor, mowing an elderly person's yard, or collecting outgrown clothes and toys for charity help youth learn the joys of assisting others and develop lifelong habits of service.

9. Read to your children and keep good literature in the home.

Great teachers have always used stories to teach, motivate, and inspire, and reading together is an important part of passing the moral legacy of our culture from one generation to another. Children's questions and comments about the stories offer parents important insights into their children's thoughts, beliefs, and concerns.

10. Limit your children's spending money.

Help them develop an appreciation for non-material rewards. In today's consumerist culture, youth could easily come to believe that image—wearing the “right” clothes, driving the “right” car, etc.—represents the path to success and happiness. Parents can make strong statements about what they value by the ways in which they allocate their own resources and how they allow their children to spend the funds entrusted to them.

11. Discuss the holidays and their meanings.

Have family celebrations and establish family traditions. Abraham Lincoln observed that participating in national celebrations causes Americans to feel “more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit.” Observing holidays and celebrating family traditions not only develop these feelings of attachment to and kinship with others, but they also serve as a special kind of glue that binds us together as human beings, as family members, and as citizens.

12. Capitalize on the “teachable moment.”

Use situations to spark family discussions on important issues. Some of the most effective character education can occur in the ongoing,

everyday life of the family. As parents and children interact with one another and with others outside the home, there are countless situations that can be used to teach valuable lessons about responsibility, empathy, kindness, and compassion.

13. Assign home responsibilities to all family members.

Even though it is often easier to clear the table, take out the trash, or load the dishwasher ourselves than to wait for a child to do it, we have an obligation to help children learn to balance their own needs and wishes against those of other family members—and ultimately, other members of society.

14. Set clear expectations for your children and hold them accountable for their actions.

Defining reasonable limits and enforcing them appropriately establishes the parents as the moral leaders in the home and provides a sense of security to children and youth. It also lets them know that you care enough about them to want them to be—or to become—people of good character.

15. Keep your children busy in positive activities.

Children and youth have remarkable energy levels, and the challenge is to channel that energy into positive activities such as sports, hobbies, music or other forms of the arts, or church or youth groups like the Scouts. Such activities promote altruism, caring, and cooperation and also give children a sense of accomplishment.

16. Learn to say no and mean it.

It is natural for children—especially teenagers—to test the limits and challenge their parents' authority. Despite the child's protests, a parent's most loving act is often to stand firm and prohibit the child's participation in a potentially hurtful activity.

17. Know where your children are, what they are doing, and with whom.

Adults need to communicate in countless ways that we care about children and that we expect the best from them, but also that we take seriously our responsibility to establish standards and to

monitor, chaperone, and supervise. At the risk of being perceived as “old fashioned,” insist on meeting your children’s friends and their parents.

18. Refuse to cover for your children or make excuses for their inappropriate behavior.

Shielding children and youth from the logical consequences of their actions fails to teach them personal responsibility. It also undermines social customs and laws by giving them the impression that they are somehow exempt from the regulations that govern others’ behavior.

19. Know what television shows, videos, and movies your children are watching.

While there are some very fine materials available, a proliferation of pornographic and hate-filled information is easily accessible to our youth. By word and example, teach your children responsible viewing habits. If you learn that your child has viewed something objectionable, candidly share your feelings and discuss why the material offends your family’s values.

20. Remember that you are the adult!

Children don’t need another buddy, but they desperately need a parent who cares enough to set and enforce appropriate limits for their behavior. Sometimes being able to say, “My dad won’t let me,” provides a convenient escape for a youth who really didn’t want to participate in a questionable activity.

Strategies adapted from Dr. Helen LeGette’s *Parents, Kids and Character: 21 Strategies to Help Your Child Develop Good Character*, available from the Character Development Group, Inc., Chapel Hill, North Carolina.